

APPLICATION FOR LETTERS PATENT OF THE UNITED STATES

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SPECIFICATION

To all whom it may concern:

Be It Known, That I, JOHN C. GOODWIN III, of Suwanee, GA, have invented certain new and useful improvements in SYSTEM AND METHOD OF MANAGING INVENTORY, of which I declare the following to be a full, clear and exact description:

SYSTEM AND METHOD OF MANAGING INVENTORY

Background of the Invention

The present invention relates to radio frequency identification devices and electronic price label systems, and more specifically to a system and method of managing inventory.

EPL systems typically include a plurality of EPLs for merchandise items in a transaction establishment. EPLs typically display the price of corresponding merchandise items on store shelves and are typically attached to a rail or shelf channel along the leading edge of the shelves. A transaction establishment may contain thousands of EPLs to display the prices of the merchandise items. The EPLs are coupled to a central server from where information about the EPLs is typically maintained in an EPL data file. Price information displayed by the EPLs is obtained from a price look-up (PLU) data file.

RFID technology provides an alternative to bar code reader technology for distinguishing and recording items for purchase. Some of the uses of RFID technology are disclosed in U.S. Patent No. 6,019,394 assigned to the assignee of the present invention. This patent is hereby incorporated by reference.

Store associates must perform routine tasks throughout the store and require information to support operation of the store. Inventory management is on routine task which can be labor intensive. Store associates must routinely count and report numbers of items and track their locations within the store.

Therefore, it would be desirable to combine the communication capabilities of electronic price label systems with RFID technology in order to perform inventory management.

Summary of the Invention

In accordance with the teachings of the present invention, a system and method of managing inventory is provided.

The system includes an electronic price label system including electronic displays which display price information and interrogators which wirelessly obtain identification information from product labels, and a computer which receives first identification information from first product labels affixed to first instances of a product adjacent one of the electronic displays and one of the interrogators, determines a first amount of the product from the first identification information, receives second identification information from second product labels affixed to second instances of the product which have been sold, determines a second amount of the product from the second identification information, receives third identification information from third product labels affixed to third instances of the product adjacent the electronic price label, and determines a third amount of the product from the third identification information representing a current inventory amount.

The inventory management method includes the steps of wirelessly receiving first identification information from first product labels affixed to first instances of a product by an electronic price label adjacent the first instances,

determining a first amount of the product from the first identification information, wirelessly receiving second identification information from second product labels affixed to second instances of the product which have been sold, determining a second amount of the product from the second identification information, wirelessly receiving third identification information from third product labels affixed to third instances of the product by the electronic price label adjacent the third instances, and determining a third amount of the product from the third identification information representing a current inventory amount.

It is accordingly an object of the present invention to provide a system and method of managing inventory.

It is another object of the present invention to provide a system and method of managing inventory which combines communication capabilities of electronic price label systems with RFID technology.

It is another object of the present invention to reduce the amount of time spent in manually counting products in a store.

Brief Description of the Drawings

Additional benefits and advantages of the present invention will become apparent to those skilled in the art to which this invention relates from the subsequent description of the preferred embodiments and the appended claims, taken in conjunction with the accompanying drawings, in which:

Fig. 1 is a block diagram of a transaction processing system; and

Fig. 2 is a flow diagram illustrating the method of the present invention.

Detailed Description of the Preferred Embodiment

Referring now to Fig. 1, transaction system 10 primarily includes server 12, EPL computer 14, shelf manager 16, checkout station 18, and radio frequency identification (RFID) label 20. Transaction system 10 may additionally include service station 22.

Server 12 handles price requests from POS terminal 24. POS terminal 24 sends item identification information to server 12 and server 12 returns the corresponding price from PLU data file 26. PLU data file is stored within storage medium 44.

Server 12 also executes inventory management software 28 which tracks inventory numbers on store shelves, tracks purchases at POS terminal 24, tracks returns and exchanges at service station 22, and may also track incoming shipments. Inventory information is stored within inventory data file 29 and is reported to inventory management software 28 by RFID interrogators 36-42, which may include RF transceivers.

Inventory management software 28 provides reports which may be displayed by display 30 or printed by printer 32. A store employee may manage reporting and data entry through input device 34, which may include a keyboard.

EPL computer 14 executes EPL software 46. EPL software 46 is responsible for scheduling and transmitting price data to EPLs 48. EPL software 46 obtains prices from PLU data file 26.

EPL software 46 also periodically sends messages to EPLs 48 requesting current quantities of items associated with EPLs 48. EPL software 46 activates RFID interrogators 38. EPL software 46 forwards received shelf inventory information to inventory management software 28.

Communication between EPL computer 14 and EPLs 48 may be wireless or wired communication. EPLs 48 includes control circuitry 62 and memory 64.

Control circuitry 52 controls operation of EPL 48. Control circuitry 62 receives incoming messages from EPL computer 14 and acknowledges messages from EPL computer 14. Control circuitry 62 also receives shelf inventory information from RFID interrogator 38 and stores the shelf inventory information in memory 64 until it can be sent to EPL computer 14.

EPL software 46 maintains EPL data file 50 which includes EPL identification information and price verification information. EPL data file 50 is stored within storage medium 52.

EPL shelf manager 16 includes RFID interrogator 38 and EPL 48. RFID interrogator 38 receives identification information from nearby items bearing RFID labels 20. RFID interrogator 38 counts items having identification information associated with EPL 48 and communicates the number to EPL software 46 through EPL 48. RFID interrogator 38 may be mounted to shelves or integrated into shelves.

Checkout station 18 includes POS terminal 24 and RFID interrogator 40. During checkout, RFID interrogator 40 obtains identification information from items labeled with RFID labels 20 and reports the identification information to POS terminal 24. POS terminal 24 sends the identification information to server 12 with price requests. After

receiving price information for the items from server 12, POS terminal 24 completes a sale of the items by accepting payment. POS terminal 24 also sends inventory adjustment information to server 12.

Service station 22 includes customer service terminal 54 and RFID interrogator 42. RFID interrogator 42 obtains identification from returned or exchanged items bearing RFID labels 20. Customer service terminal 54 completes any monitory transfers between the store and the customer, and sends inventory adjustment information to server 12.

One embodiment of RFID label 20 is active and includes RFID communicator 56, memory 58, and power source 60. Label communicator 56 sends item identification information stored in RFID memory 58 to RFID interrogators 36-42. Label communicator 56 may include an RF transceiver.

Memory 58 stores item identification information and may include a read-only memory (ROM) for one-time use, or a programmable ROM (EPROM) for repeated use.

Power source 60 may include a battery.

RFID label 20 may also be a passive label. Passive RFID labels use very little energy and may only include RFID communicator 56. Power may be derived from radio waves.

RFID communicator 56 may include a reflective antenna which has a frequency which is unique among RFID labels 20. RFID communicator 56 communicates RFID label identification information which must be cross-referenced to obtain item identification information and corresponding price information. RFID label identification may also be stored in EPL data file 50 with item identification information. RFID communicator 56 may include a number of antennas, such as conductive ink antennas.

RFID labels 20 may vary in size, depending upon product size, and may be visible or hidden when attached to products. RFID label 20 may be removably or permanently attached to products.

Turning now to Fig. 2, the inventory management method is illustrated in more detail beginning with START 70.

In step 72, inventory management software 28 adds new shipments of products to inventory data file 29. RFID interrogator 36 obtains identification information from items bearing RFID labels 20. The identification information includes item identification information or RFID label identification information, depending upon the type of RFID labels 20. Item identification information for products having active RFID labels 20 may be obtained from memory 58. Item identification information for products having passive RFID labels 20 must be entered manually and cross-referenced to RFID label identification information. Items not bearing RFID labels 20 are entered manually through input device 34 or through a barcode reader if labeled with barcodes.

In step 74, inventory management software 28 receives numbers of items on shelves from EPL software 46. EPL software 46 periodically sends messages to EPLs 48 requesting quantity information.

In step 76, inventory management software 28 receives numbers of items sold from POS terminal 24 during each transaction.

In step 78, inventory management software 28 determines shelf quantity differences and compares the shelf quantity differences to reported sales numbers for each item. In this way, inventory management software 28 can report the number of items which are removed from shelves and not purchased.

In step 80, inventory management software 28 receives numbers of items returned or exchanged from service station 22.

In step 82, inventory management software 28 combines information from RFID interrogators 36-42 to determine a current inventory for each item labeled with RFID label 20. Store personnel may then make decisions about future orders.

Although the present invention has been described with particular reference to certain preferred embodiments thereof, variations and modifications of the present invention can be effected within the spirit and scope of the following claims.